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A POETICAL PROBLEM.

IN his essay on the Poet, Emerson affirms that the changing spirit of the age is ever seeking its poetic voice: "The experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet, . . . the foremost watchman of the peak. . . . Sacred history attests that the birth of a poet is the principal event in chronology." Something of this sentiment one naturally feels on taking up a volume of new poems that have already made a certain impression. Is this man the herald of a new age in poetry? Is he himself destined to be the great poet of his generation? What truth of nature, deep-seated in our mystic frame, has he to deliver? what latent faculty of soul to reveal and exercise?

Somewhat of this pleasurable sensation of expectancy, of excited curiosity, moved the present writer as he opened the volume of "New Poems," by Mr. Francis Thompson. He can not do better at the outset than to summarize the impressions produced by a first rapid reading of the book. In the prevailing slang of the studios, they were decidedly "impressionistic." The first poem yielded an effect of vague perfume rather than of thought. As one worked further into the volume one became conscious of sensations melting into one another—of that blending of the reports of the various senses of which Shelley was fond. The author's psychology was indistinct—a blend of fancy and feeling—not imagination or passion; his prevailing mood was dreamy—he seemed to hover on a mystic borderland. His preference, among forms of verse, seemed to be for the irregular, odelike strains known as dithyrambic. Ere long one was struck by strange words of Latin derivation, and by tortured syntax. The deepest point observed was a remarkable blend or transcendence of sex-distinctions—androgynous, shall we call it, or hermaphrodite? Such philosophy as was

discoverable had a gnostic tang, and consisted in the ancient opposition of matter and spirit. This appeared most plainly in the "Anthem of Earth," the best piece in the collection. The deeply religious, Christian, even ecclesiastical tone, illustrated by many figures, struck one forcibly in an agnostic age. One felt disposed to ask: Are these verses a corollary of the ritual movement? A little further, it was made manifest that our author is a Roman Catholic, and the whole problem—diction, sentiment, and all—was resolved.

Right here one must record a conviction that this man has the essential thing, the true stuff and substance of poetry, however mixed with slag and dross. Serious indictments have been brought against him: that his lines are unmusical, that his phraseology is obscure, uncouth, even to the point of causing suspicion of affected obscurity; that in consequence it takes too much study to get at his meaning, that there is no pleasure in reading his verses. Damaging charges these—yet such as have been brought against every original poet; for it is inevitable that the fresher a man's message is the less will it be understood by the majority. Our author would do well, however, to heed these criticisms, and not soothe their sting with the flattering unction suggested; for they amount to this, that his verses lack *charm*—and the poetry, however great, that fails in grace, in natural magic, is doomed, as Browning's is. Moreover, it is perfectly possible to deliver a message, no matter how novel, in a form that admits of no doubt as to its meaning.

We proceed to deepen or correct our first impressions by a second careful reading.

Mr. Thompson's vocabulary, while it leaves, on the whole, an impression of opulence, is certainly, in part, reprehensible. We do not object to his use of the word "mere" in a fine, imaginative line,

The moonless mere of sighs,

for it may be said to have been restored to English poetry by Tennyson; nor would we quarrel with him about the old

Saxon term "rede!" We would, indeed, willingly excuse more of such Saxon revivals, of which this is perhaps the only instance in the book. They would certainly be far less objectionable, in poetry, than the many uncouth Latin derivatives with which he weighs down his verses. We do not condemn his use of unusual terms, such as "accipitrine," "flexuous," "irradiant," "nervures," "resilient" (a reminiscence of Coleridge); or condemn unqualifiedly such rare words as "decuman," "discinct," "paludament," "sciential," "surmisal" (echoes of Milton, these last), and "vidual" (used by Jeremy Taylor). Such is the legitimate method by which poets expand our vocabulary and correct its tendency to shrink. Grave and almost unqualified objection holds, however, against the use by a comparatively unknown writer of verses of distinctly obsolete terms like "arcane," "coerule," "destrier," "meinie" "ossuaries," "populacy," "tyranness," "vaward." Some of these were used by Spenser and Sir Thomas Browne—and though this fact will not avail our author, it helps to indicate, neatly, his chosen period of culture—the first half of the seventeenth century: he is in his element therein. Finally, only a poet laureate or great poet of established reputation can take the liberty of coining words, as "enrondured," "falless," "fluctuance," "fluctuous," "inassuageable," "inaureole," "intemperably," "lutany" (favorite inventions these), "tremorous," "uneuphrasied;" in a poetic aspirant it is guilt. Words in this last list, taken in connection with the other verbal classes, betray and are explained by our author's religious culture; he is plainly a victim of the diction of Douai.

Two lines from a poem in which he attains his greatest relative clearness of expression,

And how self-scornèd they the bounty fills
Of others, and the bread, even of their dearest, take—

will serve to illustrate a besetting vice of syntax (in this case an unwarrantable omission of relatives) and the obscurity arising therefrom—a serious impediment, indubitably,

to one's enjoyment of the poems. Matters are not improved by occasional typographical errors—inexcusable in the printing of poetry.

As an example of cacophony—strange in one who professes to love music—a single line will suffice, that like a wounded snake drags its slow length along:

It bursts; yet dream's snapped links cling round the limbs.

Surely the force of harshness could no farther go; and generally we miss in these verses the tranced, enchanting flow, the haunting melody of the sovereign poets. It is surprising how few quotable lines they afford, the best, perhaps, from this point of view being the following:

For all the past, read true, is prophecy.

For low they fall whose fall is from the sky.

Why have we longings of immortal pain,
And all we long for mortal?

For an approach to natural magic let us take this spirited figure of wind, cloud, and wave:

Vault, O young winds, vault in your tricksome courses
Upon the snowy steeds that reinless use
In coerule pampas of the heaven to run;
Foaled of the white sea-horses,
Washed in the lambent waters of the sun.

One can not help noting how greatly the verse would be improved by the substitution of "azure" for the archaic "coerule." We sympathize with the poet's sense of compunction, expressed in his "Retrospect," and cordially commend his resolution of silence until "a wiser day:"

Meantime the silent lip,
Meantime the climbing feet.

To pass to the emotional, imaginative, and spiritual contents of the volume: it opens with a group of poems that treat of the poet and his inspiration. Mr. Thompson expounds, in paradoxical fashion that would seem designed to repel the uninitiated, a doctrine of vision, of poetical clairvoyance and clairauidence, practically identical with that of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Both teach that the bard is a

spiritual medium between two worlds, the unseen and the seen; both hold, with Shelley, that his inward eye must be purged by suffering. Our poet elaborates these points, laying great stress upon the necessity of pain, the condition of divine inspiration, while in one of his deepest and most difficult utterances, "By Reason of Thy Law," he explains that pain and every mortal obstacle must be transcended by the poet's high conviction and resolution. An example of paradox is afforded by the counsel given the poet by his "Mistress of Vision: "

Pierce thy heart to find the key;
With thee take
Only what none else would keep;
Learn to dream when thou dost wake,
Learn to wake when thou dost sleep.
Learn to water joy with tears,
Learn from fears to vanquish fears;
To hope, for thou dar'st not despair,
Exult, for that thou dar'st not grieve;
Plough thou the rock until it bear;
Know, for thou else could'st not believe;
Love, that the lost thou may'st receive;
Die, for none other way canst live.

An ensuing group is inspired by the sentiment of love and reflection upon it. The finest piece in this series, "Love Declared," is the most, perhaps properly the only, passionate utterance in the volume:

I looked, she drooped, and neither spake, and cold
We stood, how unlike all forecasted thought
Of that desired minute! Then I leaned
Doubting; whereat she lifted—oh, brave eyes
Unfrighted: forward like a wind-blown flame
Came bosom and mouth to mine! That falling kiss
Touching long-laid expectance, all went up
Suddenly into passion; yea, the night
Caught, blazed, and wrapped us round in vibrant fire.

Time's beating wing subsided, and the winds
Caught up their breathing, and the world's great pulse
Stayed in mid-throb, and the wild train of life
Reeled by, and left us stranded on a hush.
This moment is a statue unto Love
Carved from a fair white silence. Lo, he stands
Within us—are we not one now, one, one roof,

His roof, and the partition of weak flesh
 Gone down before him, and no more, forever?—
 Stands like a bird new-lit, and as he lit,
 Poised in our quiet being; only, only,
 Within our shaken hearts the air of passion,
 Cleft by his sudden coming, eddies still
 And whirs round his enchanted movelessness.

Here belongs, as a pendant, the following little “Nocturn,” a faithful rendering of the restless ecstasy of a voluptuous summer night:

I walk, I only,
 Not I only wake;
 Nothing is, this sweet night,
 But doth couch and wake
 For its love's sake;
 Everything, this sweet night,
 Couches with its mate.
 For whom but for the stealthy-visitant sun
 Is the naked moon
 Tremulous and elate?
 The heaven hath the earth
 Its own and all apart;
 The hushed pool holdeth
 A star to its heart.
 You may think the rose sleepeth,
 But though she folded is,
 The wind doubts her sleeping;
 Not all the rose sleeps,
 But smiles in her sweet heart
 For crafty bliss.
 The wind lieth with the rose,
 And when he stirs, she stirs in her repose:
 The wind hath the rose,
 And the rose her kiss.
 Ah, mouth of me!
 Is it then that this
 Seemeth much to thee?—
 I wander only,
 The rose hath her kiss.

The ideal of female beauty suggested is the delicate, sad, æsthetic, Pre-Raphaelitic type made familiar by Sir Edward Burne-Jones:

Sweet lady, how
 Little a linking of the hand to you!
 Though I should touch yours careless for a year,

Not one blue vein would lie divinelier blue
Upon your fragile temple, to unsphere
The seraphim for kisses! Not one curve
Of your sad mouth would droop more sad and sweet.

O sweetness past profaning guess,
Grievous with its own exquisiteness!
Vesperlike face, its shadows bright
With meanings of sequestered light;
Drooped with shamefast sanctities
She purely fears eyes can not miss,
Yet would blush to know she *is*.
Ah, who can view with passionless glance
This tear-compelling countenance!

As he contemplates the feminine ideal the poet is rapt out of himself; his love transpires in adoration; he apotheosizes woman until she attains cosmic proportions; by the woman comes salvation. Thus he ranges himself amid the new school of so-called "feminist" writers, and illustrates, besides, the Mary-worshipping tendencies of his communion. His favorite imagery is sexual, and in moments of transport he undergoes a strange metathesis of sex or nympholepsy; he compares himself to a girl faint through excess of love; a babe stirs within him; again, he is a mother, suckling her first-born. His love of children and imaginative insight into their simple modes of thought finds quaint expression in the little piece, "*Ex Ore Infantium*." An extraordinary feature is an occasional escape of his soul from the besetting alternative of sex, a fusion or transcendence of its dualism—an inspiration toward a higher, an ultimate unity or re-absorption—that recalls some Gnostic speculation of old time:

Nature one hour appears a thing unsexed,
Or to such serene balance brought
That her twin natures cease their sweet alarms,
And sleep in one another's arms.
Soothsay. Behold, with rod twy-serpented,
Hermes the prophet, twining in one power
The woman with the man.

One associates with this strain of thought that identification or assimilation of the senses before noted: he divines the "form of sound." Of the setting sun he declares:

Thy visible music-blasts make deaf the sky,
I *see* the crimson blaring of thy shawms!

This introduces us naturally to another remarkable feature—his sun-worship; Mr. Thompson is an avowed Par-see, and can exclaim with Helena:

—thus, Indianlike,
Religious in mine error, I adore
The sun, that looks upon his worshiper,
But knows of him no more.

“In this field,” he sings, “where the cross planted reigns,”

I know not what strange passion bows my head
To thee, whose great command upon my veins
Proves thee a god for me not dead, not dead!

He rejoices in the miracle of spring, when the sun, earth's bridegroom, approaches in his strength; the poems that come highest grandeur are addressed to the sun, mostly in its westering aspect: the “Orient Ode,” “Ode to the Setting Sun,” “To the Sinking Sun,” “A Sunset,” and in part “An Anthem of Earth.” The beauty of the clouds of heaven also fascinates him, and this helps to make plain that his strength lies in color, light, and motion—not in form; that is to say, he is a romantic as distinguished from a classic poet—he belongs in the series last represented, in England, by Mrs. Browning and the Rossettis, brother and sister. Planets and stars also are favorite symbols of his—and in connection with these images of brightness and swiftness we note (an interesting point in this interpretation) his fondness for figures derived from falconry and the chase.

Omissions are about as essential in the interpretation of a writer, in clearing up one's thoughts about him, as are his salient features. One notes in Mr. Thompson an utter absence of the sentiment of patriotism, interest in politics, or concern for the welfare of the poor; his interests are subjective, wholly aloof from the absorbing practical questions of the hour. In this he reminds us of the Caroline lyrists. There appears to be in these poems—published in the Jubilee year—not only no praise nor criticism of his country, but

not even an allusion to England or mention of her name. Italy is or evidently would be more congenial to his temperament—but, strangely enough, there occurs no Italian reference, no evidence, in fact, of foreign travel.

“An Anthem of Earth” contains his deepest thought about humanity. The verse rises at times to a truly Shaksperian cadence. That this is not an extravagant estimate a selection will show; and, coupled with the last long selections, will also show how our poet’s thought oscillates between the poles of love and death:

Ay, Mother! Mother!
What is this man, thy darling kissed and cuffed,
Thou lustingly engender’st,
To sweat, and make his brag, and rot,
Crowned with all honor and all shamefulness?
From nightly towers
He dogs the secret footsteps of the heavens,
Sifts in his hands the stars, weighs them as gold-dust,
And yet is he successive unto nothing
But patrimony of a little mold
And entail of four planks. Thou hast made his mouth
Avid of all dominion and all mightiness,
All sorrow, all delight, all topless grandeurs,
All beauty, and all starry majesties,
And dim transstellar things; even that it may,
Filled in the ending with a puff of dust,
Confess—“It is enough.” The world left empty
What that poor mouthful crams. His heart is builded
For pride, for potency, infinity,
All heights, all deeps, and all immensities,
Arrased with purple like the house of kings,
To stall the gray rat, and the carrion-worm
Statelily lodge. Mother of mysteries!
Sayer of dark sayings in a thousand tongues,
Who bringeth forth no saying yet so dark
As we ourselves, thy darkest!

Elsewhere, in Herbertlike verses that also treat of the strength and weakness of man, he calls him a

Swinging-wicket set
Between
The Unseen and Seen.

This suggests a reference to our author’s attitude toward natural science. As has appeared already, his nature is in-

tensely religious, and he asserts in forcible terms the impotence of science in the sphere of the spiritual, and exposes the absurdity of its arrogant assumption that its ignorance should be the measure of all things in heaven and earth. He will not "thrust his arm in nature shoulder-high, and cry, 'There's naught beyond!'"

Rather, nay,
By baffled seeing, something I divine
Which baffles, and a seeing set beyond.

He prefaces some of his pieces with lines from the Bible, in one instance from the Vulgate version, and some of his favorite metaphors are suggested by the eucharistic service of his Church and objects used thereat. Thus he likens the sun to

a silver thurible
Solemnly swung, slowly,
Fuming clouds of golden fire for a cloud of incense-smoke;

and again compares it to a consecrated host drawn from its Orient tabernacle by the priestly Day—who in his turn is served by Twilight, a "violet-cassocked acolyte"—and set at last "within the flaming monstrance of the West." He tells of "the passing shower that rainbows maniple," and with him spring's snowdrops wear "saintly stoles." His piety is infected sometimes, no doubt inevitably, with the feverish devotionality of the cultus of the Sacred Heart:

And the roses were most red, for she dipped them in her heart.

As we reflect upon his clairvoyant theory of poetry, the acquaintance with pain to which he testifies, the luxury he finds in solar heat, his type of female beauty, the occasional almost hysterical strain in his love-passion and religion, his subjection to moods, and confusion of the senses of sight and hearing, we become convinced that these are phenomena of a somewhat morbid state of health, or exceptional delicacy of constitution, and the impression is confirmed by our author's own admission. He feels his body as a clog; his inspiration is *mired* by it. Connected with this, undoubtedly, is a pervasive sense of failure—of despondency, dissatisfaction, and fruitless longing.

Why have we longings of immortal pain,
And all we long for mortal?

He charges his age with partial responsibility for his failure;
it is "an age of faith grown frore."

If not in all too late and frozen a day
I come in rearward of the throats of song,
Unto the deaf sense of the aged year
Singing with doom upon me; yet give heed!
One poet with sick pinion, that still feels
Breath through the Orient gateways closing fast,
Fast closing t'ward the undelighted night!

Winter with me, alack!
Winter on every hand I find:
Soul, brain, and pulses dead;
The mind no further by the warm sense fed,
The soul weak-stirring in the arid mind,
I have sung vanity,
And nothing well devised.

We conclude these melancholy confessions with a few lines and stanzas from "The Cloud's Swan-Song"—one of the most generally intelligible pieces in the book, full of truth and beauty—which seems to have attained the highest relative degree of popularity:

A lonely man, oppressed with lonely ills
And all the glory fallen from my song,
Here do I walk among the windy hills,
The wind and I keep both one monotonous tongue. . . .

And barren is my song, and barren is my heart.

For who can work, unwitting his work's worth?
Better, meseems, to know the work for naught,
Turn my sick course back to the kindly earth,
And leave to ampler plumes the jetting tops of thought. . . .

Now with starved brain, sick body, patience galled
With fardels even to wincing—

suddenly some cloud that he had not observed as he walked, wrapped in these gloomy cogitations, expired in a little shower, and changed the current of his thought; sentiment and expression now flower into their utmost relative beauty in this book—and that beauty is Wordsworthian:

It was a pilgrim of the fields of air,
Its home was allwheres the wind left it rest,

And in a little forth again did fare,
 And in all places was a stranger and a guest.
 It harked all breaths of heaven, and did obey
 With sweet peace their uncomprehended wills;
 It knew the eyes of stars which made no stay,
 And with the thunder walked upon the lonely hills. . . .
 Right poet! who thy rightness to approve,
 Having all liberty, didst keep all measure,
 And with a firmament for ranging, move
 But at the heavens' uncomprehended pleasure.
 With amplitude unchecked, how sweetly thou
 Didst wear the ancient custom of the skies,
 And yoke of used prescription; and thence how
 Find gay variety no license could devise! . . .
 Could I face firm the Is, and with To-be
 Trust Heaven; to Heaven commit the deed, and do;
 In power contained, calm in infirmity,
 And fit myself to change with virtue ever new;
 Thou had'st not shamed me, cousin of the sky,
 Thou wandering kinsman, that did'st sweetly live
 Unnoted, and unnoted sweetly die,
 Weeping more gracious song than any I can weave.

In the opinion of the writer, Francis Thompson's function has been to add one crimson streak to the sunset of Victorian poetry.

GREENOUGH WHITE.